

To Talk Or To Walk?

One of the great lines I learned working as a substance abuse counselor is "walk your talk."

It's a phrase that's used in many circumstances, but for the recovering person, it is a life-saving phrase.

For people who find themselves struggling with addiction, they also usually find themselves struggling with years of well practiced manipulation of themselves and others, self-justification and rationalization for all kinds of destructive behavior.

Not that non-alcoholics or non-addicts are any better.

But as one wag says about addicted people, "They're just like everyone else, but more so!"

Because, it's easy to talk the talk of recovery and sobriety.

It's exceedingly difficult to walk the walk of sobriety.

Much the same can be said about living out our faith.

That is, after all, precisely what is confronting us in today's gospel lesson.

The story begins with the religious big shots.

They talk the talk better than just about anyone.

They know the Scriptures inside and out and they are familiar with all of the rules and regulations required for salvation.

In short, they are experts at the talk.

Unfortunately, all of that talk, all of that education, indeed, all of that book learned intelligence, has blinded them to the walk.

And that's what Jesus puts in front of us today.

That's the point of the story of the two sons.

One talks the talk ("Sure, I'll go!) — but refuses to walk the walk.

The other won't talk the talk ("No, I won't go!) — but ends up walking the walk.

It really is a challenge to drop the façade of the talk, and to recognize the hard reality that comes with the walk.

Which is exactly the place Jesus hones in on.

Was John the Baptist from God or from humans?

You'd think the answer is an easy one, but it rarely is.

Because those who merely talk the talk are quite often scared to death of what other people think.

While those who walk the walk come to see that if you fear God, there's nothing else in this world that you need to be afraid of.

The question Jesus poses to the religious big shots about John the Baptist is a question that reverberates throughout history.

Was Damien of Kalaupapa from God or from human origins?

Funny how that one is so easy to answer now that he's an official, and long dead, saint.

But in his day, the government officials and religious leaders were sick to death of Damien.

He relentlessly lobbied for the well-being of the Kalaupapa patients and aggressively pushed back on efforts to dehumanize these children of God.

The political and religious powers-that-be didn't like him, they didn't want him around, and they did everything they could to get rid of him.

He walked the walk — and it made those who simply talk the talk go crazy.

For example, Walter Murray Gibson - head of the health department in 1883 — said this about Damien:

“He has written abroad representing the lepers as neglected by the government...

The Bishop is dissatisfied with him and says he obtains money under false pretenses...and now he disregards me and the Board of Health.”

And in 1887 Fr. Foeusnel — Damien's Religious Superior — complains bitterly that while Damien “merits great praise for the sacrifice he has made of his life and liberty, unfortunately as this praise has come to him, he has swallowed it.

He has become intoxicated and now he is becoming dangerous.”

This is the pushback one receives when walking the walk rather than simply talking the talk.

Dr. King sat in a Birmingham jail cell 60 years ago and wrote a long letter to his fellow clergymen, now famously known as The Letter From The Birmingham Jail.

Dr. King was in prison because he walked the walk of our faith.

Standing up for the least, the lost and the left behind.

Willing to pay the price for his witness to God's justice.

And he wrote to his fellow ministers who were also exceedingly good at talking the talk.

"Wait a little longer," they said.

"Don't be so confrontational, so pushy," they said, as virulent racism and lynchings and evil segregation persisted in the day-to-day lives of our fellow citizens.

Our presiding bishop, Michael Curry, (may God be with him during this time of medical challenge), is also one who walks the walk.

Ever since his elevation as our presiding bishop, his theme has been love.

Not sentimental, gushy love.

Rather, he preaches and practices the love of the gospels.

A love that embraces all people no matter their particular persuasion, color, ethnicity, or background.

A love that embraces those who need tough love, like so many of our houseless friends, who are themselves addicted to drugs or alcohol, and who need the disruption that tough love brings to help bring about a change in their life, so they may live the life they dream of living.

A life of dignity, independence and joy.

And right here at St Elizabeth's, where you for generations have walked the walk of the Christian ministry by reaching out to our neighbors in this inner-city neighborhood.

Where you have welcomed those of different ethnicity and language and socioeconomic background and sexual orientation – all because you recognize that what matters is that we are all fellow human beings, loved by the same God, challenged by the same human frailties.

You have walked this walk for a very long time and I know that you will continue to do so as you move forward into the new ministries soon to arrive here.

Walking the walk, for Jesus, means: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the prisoner and caring for those in need.

Jesus has very little patience for those who simply talk the talk.

"Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?"

As for everyone who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice ... they are like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock.

When a flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well built.

But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation.

The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete.”

There’s a festering illness creeping through American society these days.

It likes to talk the talk of Christianity, but it’s walk reveals that this festering virus is anything but Christianity.

Because it excludes and ridicules.

It worships power and bigotry and nationalism.

It’s as far from Christianity as one can possibly get.

And it’s a virus that all of us need to speak up against, to stand against, and to reject.

Walking the walk of Christ is walking the walk of inclusion, of compassion, of justice, and of common decency.

It means that we look out for the interest of others before we look out for our own interests.

And it means that we are willing to let go, to forgive, and to surrender.

This is the walk we are compelled to make, because Jesus himself,

though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death --
even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

May we walk this walk with confidence, peace, and joy!

+amen